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NEWS

Acid in science lab storage closet responsible for Winchester schools closure

NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY | STAFF WRITER

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Members of the Massachusetts State Hazmat Response Team suit up to go into Winchester High School on Oct. 9 after an acid spill in a science lab caused the building to be evacuated and locked down. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/SHUKONG OU

Just what was the chemical that caused Winchester Public Schoo closed Oct. 10? Acid.

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The Fire Department was called to Winchester High School late in the afternoon on Oct. 9 after a custodian discovered something coming from a storage cabinet in the side room of a third floor science lab. The room is used as a chemistry prep room.

Winchester Fire Lt. Tom Surette, who is also a hazmat technician and member of the Massachusetts State Hazmat Response Team, was the officer in charge of the scene.

According to Surette's report, fire crews responded to the high school and found no smoke, fire or alarms sounding. The school, Surette said, was "still active with people in and out of the building."

A custodian on the scene met firefighters at the front door and took them to the location of the reported spill in Room 306 of C Building.

Surette reported firefighters donned protective gear with a gas meter and investigated the area.

"Upon investigation, the WFD staff members confirmed that there was a spill in a storage container with multiple other chemicals (which appeared to be acids from reading the labels on the containers) being stored in the area, 4-gas meter reading remained normal throughout the investigation with pictures taken of said area, question possible chemical reaction as a result of the spill," Surette's report reads.

Surette spoke with Facilities Coordinator Chris Conway, who was on the scene, and confirmed the ventilation system was on for the science lab as well as the rest of the building.

"Chemical hoods in said area were also activated and opened for ventilation, and door to said area was closed to prevent potential

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escaping from the said area," Surrette wrote in his report.

Surette then ordered a Hazmat Tier 1 response from the Massachusetts State Hazmat Team.

Meanwhile, the high school was then evacuated, with firefighters sweeping the building to make sure everyone was out. The building was then locked down.

Once the building was secured, the Fire Department set up a staging area next to the entrance to the C building in order to access the stairwell in the area of the science lab.

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Director of Finance & Operations Andrew Marron, Principal Paula Conis and Assistant Principal Anna Paradis were on the scene of the incident, along with a representative of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, who stayed on the scene until the Fire Department cleared the scene. The Winchester Health Department was also notified.

School officials also contacted Triumvirate Environmental, an environmental cleanup company, to be on scene. The company is currently working with the School Department to clean the high school.

The Massachusetts State Hazmat Team spent several hours at the high school completing a cleanup of the lab. Surette stated once the area was "controlled," the hazmat team issued its findings and actions to the various representatives on scene before leaving.

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WHS response

In a note to parents, Superintendent Dr. Frank Hackett broke down the situation of what had taken place earlier in the day. Hackett said given the "uncertainty" around when the school's cleanup would be completed, a decision was made to cancel school on Friday.

"Because all school meals are prepared at WHS and transported to our other buildings, our food service program will be unable to operate tomorrow," Hackett added in his letter Thursday evening. "Therefore, all PreK-12 Winchester public schools will be closed on Oct. 10, 2025."

Hackett went on to say "the health and safety of our students and staff are our top priority. We will provide updates as soon as the building is cleared and we can resume normal operations. We appreciate your understanding and flexibility during this situation."

Students will be out of school on Monday as well, given the Oct. 13 Columbus/Indigenous Peoples Day holiday.

Meanwhile, WHS parents received an update around mid-day on Friday, letting them know the schools will send out information on the spill and what next steps will be taken.

The DEP additionally cleared the opening of the building Oct. 10 to allow students to retrieve items from the building. Students were allowed access to the cafeteria and first floor only. School staff retrieved items on other floors for students.

"Because some students may not be able to retrieve items, staff will be flexible with students around assignments and deadlines next week," the note continued. "We also wanted to let all students know how the schedule will work going forward. Tuesday, Oct. 14 will be a day 3. We will skip day 4, and continue with our regular rotation from there, meaning W will be a day 5, Thursday a day 6, and so on."

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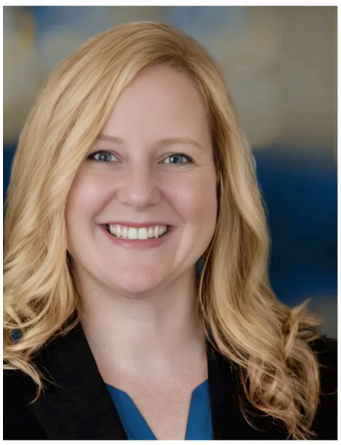

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FEATURES

'Chicago: Teen Edition' dances onto the Winchester High School stage

By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester High School presents "Chicago: Teen Edition," a bold musical that explores celebrity culture, media manipulation, and the cost of ambition. Set in the 1920s, this iconic production is sure to leave the audience wanting more. Performances will

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EVENTS

Ripley Chapel in Winchester presents 'Syldason: You Are Welcome Here'

The following was submitted by the Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church: On Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

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